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A CRITICAL COMPANION TO THE AMERICAN STAGE MUSICAL

Elizabeth L. Wollman

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Elizabeth L. Wollman

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For my students and my teachers

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements x
Introduction xi

1 The Birth of (the Popular Culture of) a Nation: Stage Entertainment in a New Land 1
The Colonial Era 2
After the Revolution 5
The Bowery and the growing class divide 7
Blackface minstrelsy 9
The Civil War and the decline of minstrelsy 13
Union Square and Tin Pan Alley 15
Uncle Tom's Cabin and *The Black Crook* 17

2 The Civil War Era to the Gilded Age 23
Burlesque 23
Vaudeville (with a side serving of operetta) 25
The Gilded Age: The entertainment industry and consolidation 30
A new theater district in Times Square 32
The Theatrical Syndicate grows more powerful 34
Tin Pan Alley and the theater industry join forces 35
Tricky terminology 37
Harrigan and Hart, Weber and Fields, and George M. Cohan 38
Black performers on Broadway 42

3 The Early Twentieth Century 51
The *Ziegfeld Follies* 51
The demise of the Syndicate: Enter the Shuberts 54
The First World War and ASCAP 56
A new generation of composers and lyricists 58
The Actors' Equity strike of 1919 61
The Roaring Twenties 63
Shuffle Along 65
Show Boat 70

4 The Great Depression to the Second World War 77
Business on Broadway in troubling times 79
Broadway musicals: Boom and bust 82
The show must go on: Depression-Era revues 84
Book musicals gain weight 87
George and Ira Gershwin 88
The Cradle Will Rock 94
Cole Porter and *Anything Goes* 98
Rodgers and Hart and *Pal Joey* 101

5 The Second World War to 1960 109
The Second World War and popular culture 109
The war and Broadway 111
Rodgers and Hammerstein and the "birth" of the integrated musical 112
Social integration through the war years 117
The postwar era 121
Postwar Times Square 123
Rodgers and Hammerstein after the war 125
Postwar musicals not by Rodgers and Hammerstein 128

6 We've Surely Got Trouble: The 1960s and 1970s 139
The rise of youth culture and the decline of Tin Pan Alley 140
Broadway courts the new youth culture 142
New competition from beyond Broadway 144
The concept musical 145
Hair: Enter the rock musical 149
The 1970s 151
The Broadway musical in the "Me" Decade 152
New directions and new diversity on Broadway 157
Broadway and the financial crisis 159

7 The Megamusical to *Hamilton* 163
Broadway in the 1980s 163
Depictions of difference in the 1980s 164
Enter the megamusical 167
The 1990s 172
The renovation of Times Square 173
The musical in the 1990s 176

A new century: From the aughts to the teens 178
Broadway in and after crisis 179
Broadway today: Reflections of contemporary media, culture, and society 180

8 Critical Perspectives 187
Putting It Together: A Step-by-Step Look at Musicals from the Page to the Stage 187
Robert Meffe

Making Musicals for Serious Pleasure 198
Stacy Wolf

Off Off Off Off Broadway: Musical Development Out of Town and Regionally 214
Laura MacDonald

Today, Broadway; Tomorrow, the World: The "American" Musical and Globalization 225
Jessica Sternfeld

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Studying the Stage Musical 237
Elizabeth Titrington Craft and Joanna Dee Das

Notes 251
Bibliography 261
Index 273

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INTRODUCTION

As its title might imply, *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical* is meant to serve as a companion to the many other fine books that survey the history of the American stage musical as it has developed, mostly on, but also off Broadway and across the United States. To that end, I have written this book to complement, not compete with, the extant musical theater histories that almost overwhelmingly trace the history of the Broadway musical with primary emphasis on the genre's structure, style, and aesthetic development. This book emphasizes instead the American stage musical as an ever-adapting commercial entertainment form that is the product of an endlessly shifting social, cultural, political, and economic environment.

From the Civil War through the early twenty-first century, the American stage musical has remained a vibrant, viable entertainment form. Yet it has not managed to survive devastating economic and political crises, radical sociocultural shifts, and the rise of far more modern, inexpensive, mass-mediated popular entertainments by accident, luck, or inherent brilliance. Rather, like all commercial entertainment forms, the musical theater has by necessity repeatedly reinvented itself to fit the needs of its ever-changing audience. Were this not the case, a war or severe economic downturn would have easily killed it off years ago. Or, even more likely, it would have become extinct with the advent of film, or the record player, or television, or the Internet. But the American stage musical lives on and, in recent years, has even grown in worldwide popularity. This book, then, is more about how the genre has developed, adapted, and survived than it is a study of the various stylistic or aesthetic ingredients that make up its canon.

And yet *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical* is hardly a radical departure, nor does it aim to be an alternative history. Like a vast majority of books about musicals, this one follows chronologically, from the genre's earliest influences in the Colonial Era, to its formation in the post-Civil War years and early twentieth century, to the present. Like other histories, too, this one examines the ways the American stage musical has drawn from outside influences, such as blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, film, television, jazz, rock music, and hip-hop.

Finally, like the others, this book focuses for the most part on musicals that have run on Broadway. There is good reason for this: plenty of musicals have been performed across the country (and increasingly across the globe), but New York's commercial theater district, located in the Times Square neighborhood of midtown Manhattan, continues to house the largest concentration of commercial theaters in the nation. It is also home to the industry that controls them and exerts strong influence on the genre as it is developed elsewhere. New York City's storied theater district, known informally as "Broadway" due to its proximity to the famous avenue that cuts up through Times Square, has since the early twentieth century staged productions that have both mirrored and helped shape American popular culture. The fact that "Broadway" is synonymous with "the American stage musical" is no accident—nor can New York City's influence on the growth and development of the American stage musical be underestimated.

Where this book departs, however, is in its attempt to take more of a bird's-eye view of the genre than most other books do. While most of Broadway's "greatest hits," from *Show Boat* to *Oklahoma!* and *A Chorus Line* to *Hamilton*, are detailed, and while a handful of Off Broadway productions are too, none is necessarily analyzed closely for style, score, or overall aesthetics. Instead, this book turns its lens on the outside forces—whether cultural, political, social or economic—that have helped shape the musical into one of the US's premier mainstream commercial entertainment forms.

A book about the American stage musical that does not devote itself to close readings of landmark Broadway productions might seem an odd departure from the norm, but this is precisely the point of the book: in the roughly two decades that musical theater studies has developed as a vibrant, interdisciplinary field of study, many excellent books about the genre have been published to meet the demand at colleges and universities across the world. These books range broadly in style and approach, but most trace the growth of the Broadway or Broadway-style musical by moving from one important production, composer and lyricist team, or innovative producer or director to the next, pausing each time to analyze representative musical numbers, describe aspects of a show's structure or style, or unpack notable scenes.

There are, in short, plenty of studies of the stage musical that focus on the shows themselves; I have referred to as many as I have been able to get my hands on in the course of researching and writing this book. I am grateful for the insights of fine scholars such as Gerald Mast (*Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen*, 1987), Gerald Bordman (*American*

Musical Theatre: A Chronicle, 2001), John Bush Jones (*Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, 2003), Ray Knapp (*The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, 2005; *The American Musical and the Formation of Personal Identity*, 2006), Larry Stempel (*Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, 2010), Stacy Wolf (*Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 2011), and James Leve (*American Musical Theater*, 2016), among others. These scholars' surveys have served countless undergraduate and graduate students; they have served their contemporaries as well. I have learned a great deal from the books I have turned to while researching this one, and have no desire to attempt to supplant them. Instead, I hope this book will contribute to a growing wealth of knowledge about the musical theater by examining it from different, complementary angles.

In considering the many external factors that have influenced the development of the American musical, I hope to help fill in gaps, as well as to address questions that I regularly field in nearly two decades of teaching. In my experience, most students who take courses on musicals come away with a strong grasp of the genre's most important creators, characteristic structures and stylistic elements. Over the course of a semester, they learn, for example, about 32-bar song form, the plot of *Oklahoma!*, what an "I Want" song is, and the fact that *Cats* is, for the most part, about cats that sing and dance. They know who Richard Rodgers and Ethel Merman were, about the list songs Cole Porter and Stephen Sondheim wrote, and about why George M. Cohan and Lin-Manuel Miranda matter.

Fewer, however, come away with a clear sense of how various forces help keep the stage musical alive and kicking. I am frequently interrupted during lectures about *Show Boat*, George Gershwin, or *Rent* with questions about how the theater industry works, why it is centered in New York, what a preview period is, or how musicals function politically, culturally, or in competition with other forms of entertainment. In an attempt to answer at least some of these questions, this book explores the relationship that the Broadway musical—whether as a fully developed genre or as a series of early influences—has had with American commerce, society, and (popular) culture. The body of the text considers the stage musical's history and development chronologically, with an eye toward the sociocultural, artistic, and commercial trends that have influenced and altered it. The contributed essays at the end of the book provide additional insights about how musicals are conceived and developed, how they function on the amateur, American regional, and international levels, and how they are studied by scholars.

No entertainment product exists in a vacuum, and thus, the American stage musical is neither merely a succession of openings and closings nor a series of scripts, stars, and scores. I hope this book will help students engage with larger questions about the American stage musical as an ever-changing art form that is forever adapting to the needs of the world around it.

CHAPTER 1
THE BIRTH OF (THE POPULAR CULTURE OF) A NATION: STAGE ENTERTAINMENT IN A NEW LAND

Over the course of its hundred-plus years of development, the American stage musical has grown into an international entertainment commodity. There are, of course, still always plenty of stage musicals to be found in New York City's Times Square, the commercial theater district located at the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, and stretching roughly from West 42nd Street to West 48th Street.[1] Since the early twentieth century, this legendary rough-and-tumble neighborhood has cradled the development of the entertainment form that has become known, even as it has globalized, as—the "Broadway musical." For over a century, Times Square has been both spiritual home to the American stage musical and geographical home to the commercial theater industry in the United States, which is one of many reasons why the neighborhood is so world-famous.

The stage musical is distinguished herein from latter-day film, television, and Internet musicals, all of which are mass-mediated entertainments. Part of the appeal of stage musicals is their very liveness: they are performed by actors on a stage before live audiences, who often pay handsomely for the experience.

Yet the advent of mass media has allowed the American stage musical to grow well beyond the physical confines of Times Square. Today, many stage musicals are conceived, developed, and performed not only in Times Square, but across North America and increasingly in countries around the globe. It is now possible for audiences to see American stage musicals that have been translated into local languages and cast with local performers, in cities as diverse as Seoul, Port-of-Spain, Hamburg, and Minsk. It has become newly possible for people across the globe to see or hear countless American stage musicals without ever once having to travel to Times Square. Stage musicals may not be a true mass medium, but the genre has, over decades, adapted to emulate more easily mass-mediated forms for its own purposes and survival.

Nevertheless, the American stage musical remains spiritually—if not always geographically or physically—tied to a minuscule segment of Broadway, the 33-mile avenue that runs up the length of Manhattan, through the Bronx, and into Westchester County. After all, "American stage musical" is hardly a household term; you might even have been wondering what, exactly, I have been talking about in these opening paragraphs. Rather, the expression that instantly connotes the genre is "Broadway musical." To call Broadway just another street in New York would be like calling Paris just another city in Europe or Hollywood just another neighborhood in Los Angeles. Broadway is not only a physical location but also an international brand. And a Broadway musical is now a global commodity (Traub 2005, 239).

Yet well before terms like "international brand" or "global commodity" entered the vernacular, there were myriad reasons that this single avenue—really, just a teeny, tiny segment of it—became so closely associated with the commercial stage in the US. Keep this in mind, though, because we have miles to go, and a lot of practicing to do, before we can make it to Broadway. Before we get there, we will need to trace the earliest influences on the American stage musical, keeping an eye on the birth of the commercial theater industry in the process.

The Colonial Era

Named the Wickquasgeck Trail by the Lenape Indians, a well-trod thoroughfare that initially ran fifteen miles up the length of Manhattan into the Bronx was used for trade with other tribes and, later, with Dutch, French, and British settlers. The Dutch, who arrived in New York in the early seventeenth century under the auspices of the Dutch West India Company, had several names for the path: *Heere Straat* ("High Street"), *Heere Wegh* ("High Way") or *Breedeweg* ("Broadway"). When the British took New Amsterdam from the Dutch in 1664, the name of the street was Anglicized, occasionally as "Broadway Street," but usually just as "Broadway," which was the name that stuck.

The only road traversing the island of Manhattan for some hundred years after the arrival of Europeans, Broadway remained an important locus as New York grew into a colony. Churches, municipal buildings, taverns, stables, slaughterhouses, shops, prisons, and a site for public executions sprang up along the avenue as the city developed northward. Largely absent through

the seventeenth century, however, was the one commercial enterprise Broadway would become most famous for: the theater.

There is not a lot of information on theater in the early Colonial Era. Presumably, the earliest colonists were so busy trying to survive that staging popular entertainments was pretty low on their list of priorities. If theatrical events were staged at all, they were probably amateur productions, usually with religious themes. The first physical structure intended for use as a theater was erected around 1716 in Williamsburg, Virginia, which had been settled in 1638. Performances at this venue were typically staged by local amateurs, or by students attending the nearby College of William and Mary, which had been established in 1693 (Stempel 2010, 21).

Initially, the northern colonies were stricter than Virginia when it came to staged entertainments. Dutch Calvinists in New Amsterdam, for example, considered theater to be sacrilegious. Settlers in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Delaware agreed, so all those colonies passed laws prohibiting theatrical performance. Yet as the Colonial Era progressed, anti-theater laws were increasingly ignored by both citizens and officials.[2] Settlers arrived by the boatload on a near-daily basis, and as the colonies grew, a growing population decided that the occasional theatrical production was hardly offensive enough to complain about.

In 1735, advertisements in the *South Carolina Gazette* alerted Charleston residents to performances of the ballad opera *Flora, or, Hob in the Well* at a local makeshift theater. The production proved so popular that the city of Charleston built the Dock Street Theatre, which was the first permanent, professional theater building in the country. The Dock Street was inaugurated with an encore production of *Flora* which, in turn, spurred a national craze for ballad operas. Enormously popular in England, ballad operas—of which John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) is perhaps most famous—were satirical operas in English, featuring songs that were either previously composed or newly written in popular styles, and thus recognizable by much of the audience.

As interest in the theater grew across the colonies through the early 1700s, itinerant or "strolling" companies, comprised of actors and musicians, began to travel from town to town on horse-drawn carts in a huge (and probably maddeningly slow) loop. These companies would stop in one town, perform for a few days or weeks, and then move on to another; no American city yet had the funds or population to support permanent performing companies. As strolling companies grew more popular, many chose one city or town to use as a home-base from which they traveled slightly less arduous

distances (Preston 2008, 4). Because colonists who disapproved of the theater on religious grounds often tended to be less offended by music, many strolling companies became expert at combining the two, performing, for example, segments from opera, instrumental works, dramatic readings, and excerpts from well-known plays in the course of a single evening (Mates 1962, 6–7).

Because a certain hybridity was established in American theatrical entertainment from the country's infancy, the approach to genre as it developed through the Colonial Era was notably loose. Strolling companies and their audiences showed little concern for rigid definitions, or for keeping various styles of performance distinct from one another. Through much of the eighteenth century, it was not at all unusual for a night at the theater to include both a "play" and an "afterpiece." A "play" could refer to a Shakespeare tragedy, Restoration comedy, opera, ballet, or some combination thereof. An "afterpiece" was usually a short, upbeat sketch with songs accompanied by orchestra, which was performed at the end of the evening. Just about every program in every theater in every colony bridged highbrow and lowbrow tastes, frequently transforming comedy into tragedy and then back again as the evening unfolded (Lewis 2003, 8–9).

Colonial New York was established as a center for trade, so through the late-seventeenth century, the arts initially took a back-seat to the businesses developing on Wall Street, and the city's cultural output lagged far behind that of other east coast cities such as Philadelphia and Boston. Yet a demand in New York for entertainment grew by the turn of the century (Charyn 2003, 26–7). In 1732, a two-story wooden structure known alternately as the New Theatre or the Theatre in Nassau Street opened on Nassau between Maiden Lane and John Street, just west of Broadway. This theater probably also functioned as a brewery, warehouse, or both. When it was used for live entertainment, it could seat about 280 people. At first, the space featured infrequent, and usually amateur, performances. Yet on March 5, 1750, it hosted New York's first documented professional theater production: Shakespeare's *Richard III*, performed by a troupe visiting from England (Frick and LoMonaco 1995, 1165).

By this point, New York was home to approximately 13,000 people—not yet enough to justify a permanent theater company, but certainly enough to keep visiting ones busy and well compensated.[3] The arrival in New York of theater impresario David Douglass in the late 1750s led to the establishment of more theaters in lower Manhattan. Douglass's Theatre in John Street (1767), which could seat 750, became a popular venue until it was demolished in 1798 (ibid., 1167).

In 1774, the Continental Congress resolved to curtail all activities that distracted from the goals of the American Revolution, which commenced the following year. Professional theater activity in the colonies slowed significantly, and strolling companies were banished (Preston 2008, 5). After the war, restrictions against professional theater were lifted; President Washington made a point of attending shows in New York and Philadelphia, thereby encouraging citizens of the newly independent nation to do the same (Kenrick 2008, 51). Strolling companies established before the war came out of exile (Preston 2008, 5), theaters rose across the nation, and for the first time, permanent theater companies and orchestras did, too. The opportunities these new venues provided brought many European musicians and thespians to the new country (Preston 2008, 5).

After the Revolution

The spike in venues across the country was the result of a concerted effort to define the United States as culturally distinct from the European nations that had colonized it and that continued to exert strong influence on its popular arts. More practically, it also reflected a surge in population. Between 1789 and 1840, the population of the country grew from roughly four million to seventeen million, and with this nearly fourfold increase came an equally sharp rise in the demand for diversified entertainment.[4]

New York City's postwar growth was especially remarkable. The city's population, roughly 12,000 at the end of the war, doubled two years later (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 270). Already the most populous city in the US by the time of the first census in 1790, New York had about 300,000 citizens by 1840 (Jackson 1995, 923).[5] Manhattan absorbed newcomers by developing northward, using Broadway as its "commercial and cultural spine" (Kenrick 2008, 51). Yet during the Federalist Era, the hub of the city remained in lower Manhattan, where a number of new theaters—the Park, Chatham Garden, and Bowery—were erected around the turn of the century (Frick and LoMonaco 1995, 1166).

Federalist-Era audiences were larger than Colonial ones, but offerings remained similar, though the performances were more often by resident and not traveling companies. In a single night, early-nineteenth-century-audiences might have been treated to a bill featuring a drama, symphony, dance piece, and opera, followed by a short musical afterpiece over the course of four or five hours. American performance venues had yet to be

devoted to specific genres. There were no opera houses, concert venues or recital halls, nor was there sufficient demand to justify their creation (Bordman 2001, 7). As in the Colonial Era, Federalist-Era theater productions might seem, by contemporary standards, numbingly long and disorganized. Spectators at the time did not mind, however; they were, after all, in no rush to get home in time to watch the evening news or late show.

It is perhaps fitting, considering the copious amount of genre mixing, that the early- to mid-nineteenth century saw a rise in popularity of the melodrama. Melodramas blended heightened drama and music to tell "unambiguous tales of right and wrong that appealed directly to the emotions." Usually, a lot of action was involved, though there was not as much attention paid to character development. In melodrama, actors playing two-dimensional characters did not typically sing; rather, the genre relied on "action music" that underscored what the characters were saying as they spoke, as well as to express what they felt or thought when they were not speaking. Like many other theater genres to become popular in the new world, melodrama originated in England, but was quickly adapted for American audiences (Stempel 2010, 39–40). The most popular American melodramas, the music to which has been lost, included William H. Smith's *The Drunkard* (1844), George L. Aiken's stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859).

Just as genres were mixed on the stages of American theaters, audiences were comparatively well-blended, too. During the Federalist Era, theaters and genres were not as strongly associated with class or race as they would become. For example, because of its size and the fact that it initially had little in the way of competition, the Park Theatre was in some respects an egalitarian place in that it admitted anyone who could purchase a ticket. The egalitarianism, however, only went so far: working-class white men grabbed tickets for the pit at 50 cents a pop, upperclassmen escorted wives and daughters to private boxes that cost twice as much to occupy,[6] and lowerclassmen, prostitutes and black patrons paid 25 cents to sit in the balcony (Erenberg 1981, 15).

Regardless of class or background, late-eighteenth-century-American theater audiences tended to behave more like fans at contemporary sports events than do most present-day theatergoers (Preston 2008, 6). During any show in any American city, prostitutes would conduct business in the balcony, while the men they propositioned shouted at the actors and flung a highly imaginative variety of food items (along with the occasional handful of pebbles) at performers they disliked. The upper-class box-holders, often more interested in seeing and being seen than in what the actors were doing,

chatted, flirted, and drank (Lott 1993, 6). When spectators in the pit were not fending off pickpockets, dodging the hot wax dripping from candles in the chandeliers overhead, or sidestepping the food items (and pebbles) that flew toward the stage, they shouted requests at the musicians and actors. Less frequently, they would climb onto the stage to confront the performers (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 404). The copious amounts of alcohol that were available during performances only encouraged crowds to grow rowdier as the evening progressed. By many accounts, the amount of tobacco smoke generated during a typical performance made the air truly "revolting" (Mates 1962, 68). Fistfights and riots broke out among spectators often enough that many theater boxes were designed to lock from the inside, and had extra exit doors that led the wealthiest patrons safely and quickly into the alleyway (ibid., 66).

The Bowery and the growing class divide

In the early nineteenth century, the Bowery in lower Manhattan became New York City's most important entertainment center. A vital commercial neighborhood that had grown around the city's main route to Boston, the Bowery was attractive, if rather smelly because of the many slaughterhouses and tanneries concentrated there. In the 1820s, a group of local businessmen, hoping to rid the Bowery of its alienating stench, convinced Henry Astor, owner of the storied Bull's Head Tavern and several surrounding abattoirs, to relocate his establishments to the rural area east of what is now Gramercy Park. Restaurants, taverns, and theaters were subsequently lured to the newly empty, newly pleasant-smelling Bowery (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 475).

In 1826, the country's largest theater to date was erected on the site where the Bull's Head had stood. Modeled after a Greek temple, the theater had 3,500 seats, faux marble pillars, gold- and red-painted private boxes, and gaslight, which was both a major innovation and the reason for the theater's remarkable flammability. Dubbed the New York Theatre when it opened and renamed the Bowery Theatre in 1828 after the first time it caught fire, the theater was rebuilt after fires in 1836, 1838, and 1845. It finally burned to the ground for good in 1929 (Wilmeth 2007, 123).

With this namesake theater at its heart, the thriving neighborhood catered largely if not exclusively to the working-class New Yorkers populating the adjoining neighborhoods. In its heyday, the Bowery boasted bustling

oyster bars, brothels, cockfighting pits, taverns, restaurants, and gambling houses. It also established itself as an important theater center.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, there had been no attempt to centralize the city's theaters, which had traditionally cropped up wherever space allowed and demand justified (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 475–6). But the Bowery's many newly empty slaughterhouses and barns were quickly and easily refurbished as theaters of varying sizes, all of which began offering different kinds of entertainments (Lewis 2003, 13–14).

When it was not on fire, the Bowery Theatre developed a clientele that changed slowly with the neighborhood. At first, it appealed to upper-class patrons with a roster of stars visiting from Europe. These often performed alone or as lead characters in Shakespeare plays, farces, sentimental domestic dramas, operas, classical dances, or a combination thereof. Yet the size of the Bowery worked against it in its failure to draw working-class audiences, and thus to frequently fill to capacity. Within a few years, programming at the Bowery was adjusted to include aquatic displays, equestrian events, novelty acts, and melodramas, which lured a more diversified clientele. Eventually, programming at the theater gave itself over entirely to working-class patrons.

The changing face of the Bowery Theatre and the neighborhood surrounding it relates to profound social changes that occurred in the US between the mid-1820s and late 1840s. At this point, an "unprecedented separation and discrete self-definition of classes" took place among members of the bourgeoisie, middle, and working classes, all of whom began to see themselves as economically and culturally distinct from one another. The solidification of the American class structure had direct impact on, and was reflected in, the development of American popular entertainment (Lott 1993, 69–70). While the country's elite continued to look to and borrow from Europe for its entertainment, there arose a working-class culture that instead began to glorify "American democracy and the average white man," and to self-consciously distance itself from anything hinting at old-world, effete aristocracy (Toll 1974, 3–4). Through the nineteenth century, the country saw the increased segregation not just of audiences, but of actors and theatrical styles (Levine 1988, 56–7). The growing class divide was only exacerbated by the 1849 Astor Place riots, which reflected the extent to which upper-and lower-class taste cultures had diverged by mid-century.

In 1847, a group of wealthy Manhattanites decided to raise money for a new opera house on Lafayette Street between Astor Place and East 8th Street. Designed exclusively for the upper classes, the Astor Opera House made

most seats available by subscription only. The venue imposed a dress code demanding that patrons be clean-shaven and very expensively dressed (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 724, 762).

In May 1849, the British actor William Macready headlined at the Astor in *Macbeth*. Macready had a strong upper-class fan base in America, but also a public rivalry with the emotive New York-born actor Edwin Forrest, whose fervent patriotism and outspokenness had made him a working-class hero and one of the Bowery's first celebrities (Levine 1988, 63). On the first night that Macready appeared at the Opera House, his very presence generated such hostility among Forrest's working-class fans that the city's new mayor, Caleb Smith Woodhull, ordered 350 members of the city's militia and 250 policemen to guard the Astor for subsequent performances.

Infuriated by the excessive response, some 10,000 people amassed outside the theater for the next performance (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 763). When the crowd on the street began throwing bricks and stones, the military, for the first time in American history, fired into the crowd (Bernstein 1990, 149). When the ensuing riot ended, eighteen people were dead; four more would succumb to their injuries in the following week. Over 150 people were injured, and 117 people, a vast majority of them working-class men, were arrested (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 764).

Order was quickly restored, but New York City and its theaters were permanently changed. So was the face of the burgeoning entertainment industry, which had long approached the population of the country as one unified mass. After the Astor Place riots, American entertainment and its audiences became increasingly fragmented (Toll 1976, 21–3). The Astor Opera House, now tarnished in the eyes of many New Yorkers, was sold and eventually demolished. The upper classes moved further uptown to the newly affluent Union Square for their theatrical entertainment, while the Bowery continued to cultivate a working-class clientele.

Blackface minstrelsy

It was in the Bowery, New York's own "lower-class world of rough amusement," that the country's first homegrown pop-culture craze developed (Bernstein 1990, 150). Spectacular, complicated, and both overtly and insidiously racist, blackface minstrelsy helped set the tone for much American popular culture to follow. A direct influence on the American stage musical, blackface

minstrelsy at its height reflected the nation's growing high- and low-culture divide, as well as white America's anxieties about slavery and the impending Civil War (Lott 1993, 8).

Blackface minstrelsy peaked in popularity between the 1840s and 1890s. The genre was preceded by British characterizations of "negroes," who were typically not depicted with the help of makeup (Lewis 2003, 66), and by solo "Ethiopian delineators" in the US, who often did use makeup. Ethiopian delineators were frequent presences in late-eighteenth-century circuses and traveling shows, where they appeared either as characters in or between the acts of plays (Kenrick 2008, 52). Perhaps the most famous Ethiopian delineator in the US was Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, who became all the rage in the early 1830s with his "Jump Jim Crow" act.

Born in lower Manhattan in 1808, young Rice traveled the country as a stagehand and blackface bit-player. At some point during his travels in 1828, he allegedly observed an old, crippled black man singing and dancing while cleaning a stable (Mates 1985, 77). Rice practiced the shuffling dance steps and the little hop and twist he claimed he learned from the man, quickened the pace, and took to the stage in shabby clothing and blackface (Toll 1976, 82). As he traveled from city to city, Rice honed his act and developed an increasingly complex character.

Because his signature song, "Jump Jim Crow," was in simple verse-chorus form, it could easily be extended to accommodate topical and geographically specific references. The song's chorus described the dance Rice performed as he sang:

> So I wheel about
> I turn about
> I do just so
> And ebery time I wheel about
> I jump Jim Crow

Stanzas, regularly added or switched, often included social or political commentary, local inside jokes, shout-outs and regional references, and frequent boasts about strength, smarts, or sexual prowess (Mates 1985, 77).

Rice appeared at the Bowery Theatre in December 1832 on a bill that featured the actor (and father to John Wilkes) Junius Brutus Booth. The crowd was so taken by Rice's act that they would not let him off the stage, instead demanding he jump Jim Crow some 20 times (Lewis 2003, 10). The Bowery appearance helped catapult Rice to national and then international

fame. Between 1832 and the mid-1840s, Rice performed on the best American stages, and made his London debut in 1836. He also contributed to the rise in popularity of white entertainers in blackface, many of whom claimed that their exaggerated performances reflected accurate, authentic portrayals of black people they observed. This went over well with white spectators, a majority of whom lacked the cultural expertise or sensitivity to have even the vaguest notion about whether what they were seeing onstage was accurate or not (Toll 1976, 81–3).

The American craze for solo Ethiopian delineators continued until four such New York-based performers united in frustration over a lack of steady work in the lean years following the Panic of 1837 (ibid., 137). In late 1842 or early 1843, Billy Whitlock, Richard Pelham, Dan Emmett, and Frank Brower devised an evening's worth of entertainment in hopes that by bonding together they could lure more spectators (Toll 1974, 30). As they honed their act of "oddities, peculiarities, eccentricities, and comicalities of that Sable Genus of Humanity," they began calling themselves the Virginia Minstrels (Bordman 2001, 11). The name of the southern state boosted their claims to authenticity; the term "minstrels" capitalized on the contemporaneous popularity of a touring European group called the Tyrolese Minstrel Family (Toll 1976, 84).

The plan worked, and the Virginia Minstrels became a box-office draw. The group's rapid rise to fame resulted in bookings in Boston and New York, and a tour of England in summer 1843. Following their trip abroad, the four men went separate ways (Hamm 1979, 127–8). Yet the brevity of their collaboration belied their cultural impact: the Virginia Minstrels had devised an enormously popular new entertainment form.

Blackface minstrelsy took off across the United States with unprecedented speed and intensity. By autumn 1843, virtually every major city in the country had at least one resident minstrel troupe; itinerant troupes and solo performers toured smaller cities and towns (Hamm 1979, 130). A mere three years after the Virginia Minstrels debuted in the Bowery, New York City alone boasted ten resident blackface minstrel troupes. By the early 1850s, that number had doubled (Kenrick 2008, 53).

There was no one standard format for minstrel shows, but many were organized into a distinctive three-part form that Edwin Pearce Christy (1815–62), founder of the Buffalo-based Christy's Minstrels, took credit for (Knapp 2006, 53). In part one, sometimes called the "concert," the entire troupe sat in a semicircle with the tambourine player ("Tambo") at one end and the bones or percussion player ("Bones") at the other. Often skilled

physical comedians as well as musicians, the performers playing Tambo and Bones typically applied heavy dialect, exaggerated gestures, and rapid-fire punning to amuse the audience. Tambo and Bones served as comic foibles for the comparatively pompous Interlocutor, who often sat in the center of the company and served as the MC.

The second section, the "olio," was akin to the modern-day talent show. It offered spectators a lineup of unrelated performances: circus stunts, acrobatic and magic acts, comedy bits, songs, dances, and skits. The olio often took place downstage before a dropped curtain so the stage could be set for the final act: a one-act sketch with songs and dances, which borrowed its name, the "afterpiece," from Colonial-Era entertainments. In pre-Civil War minstrel shows, the afterpiece often featured idealized depictions of plantation life, and portrayed slaves as dimwitted dependents who were cared for by wise and benevolent white masters (Toll 1976, 89).

Virulently racist though it was, minstrelsy allowed white male performers—and, by extension, their audiences—to transgress, often in ways that had less to do with race than with class and gender. The instruments associated with minstrelsy—bones, fiddle, banjo, tambourine—might have been strongly associated with African American culture, but minstrel music was overwhelmingly rooted in European styles. Minstrel shows allowed performers and audiences to reinforce their hard-won position in the nation's cultural hierarchy, if very often by exploiting people occupying the lower hierarchical rungs. The genre also allowed white male performers to behave in ways that were often perceived offstage as effeminate or socially taboo: singing tear-jerking sentimental songs, dancing, cross-dressing. Blackface thus helped cultivate "an environment acceptable to middle-and lower-class white men for music-making and dance that was, if not fully masculine, nevertheless capable of being embodied only by men" (Knapp 2006, 52).

It is no coincidence that minstrelsy was at its most popular in the US before the Civil War, at a time when debates about slavery dominated the national discourse. The emergence of blackface minstrelsy offered many white spectators a means of processing conflicting concerns about slavery on the one hand, and the prospect of absorbing an enormously disadvantaged, newly freed ethnic group on the other (Toll 1976, 84).

Of course, then as now, many spectators probably did not think particularly critically about what any entertainment genre represented along sexual, racial, religious, or cultural lines. Minstrel shows were, for a lot of people, surely little more than innovative, amusing entertainments. But the form helped solidify, for some, the belief that blacks were inferior to

whites; still others likely believed that minstrelsy was educational, and its gross caricatures accurate and authentic. Whether for or against slavery, some audience members surely were reassured by pre-war depictions of fantastical plantations, where "dancing darkies" (rarely referred to as "slaves") partied and picnicked, lived like so many "overgrown children," and were "protected by loving masters and mistresses who acted like doting parents" (Toll 1976, 100). Blackface minstrelsy, in short, offered a curious blend of "respect and fear, affection and hate, need and scorn, caring and exploitation" that resulted in a similarly curious blend of guilt, admiration, and curiosity among audiences (Lewis 2003, 70).

The Civil War and the decline of minstrelsy

Months before the outbreak of the Civil War, the newly formed Confederacy severed ties with the North, which plunged into financial crisis. Panic set in through 1860 as debts went unpaid, merchandise intended for southern states sat in warehouses, and the worth of commodities plummeted. By summer 1861, newspapers were estimating northern losses at nearly a half-billion dollars (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 873).

The Confederacy's advantage, of course, did not last long. Once the slave trade collapsed, the southern states were decimated while the Union's redirected economy boomed like never before (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 873–5). Formerly reliant on the Mississippi River, trade instead became dependent on the nation's railroads, which grew and improved everywhere but the South through the 1860s. Wheat, grain, and cattle brought east from the western territories and then shipped to Europe bolstered the Union, as did demand for weapons, ships, uniforms, and medical supplies. The publishing and communications industries grew exponentially as the public demanded news about the war and soldiers craved diversions—printed music, reading material, and photographs (dirty and otherwise)—during lulls at the front (Hamm 1979, 231).

In times of crisis, the demand for entertainment often surges, and the Civil War Era proved no different. Union theaters were sluggish during the first year of conflict (Mates 1985, 31), but the booming economy and desire for distraction from current events led to some of the longest-running, most commercially successful shows the country had yet seen. The shows audiences flocked to see, however, were not especially innovative. Just as the Civil War years "brought no new musical styles to American song," relying instead on the comforting, even mindless familiarity of forms that had long

been popular (Hamm 1979, 248), Civil War-era stages were usually home to old favorites: Shakespeare plays, comedies, and melodramas (Bordman 2001, 16). Blackface minstrelsy remained popular, too, though a newly somber tone crept in, reflecting the "unprecedented suffering and anguish" of Americans at war (Toll 1974, 105–7).

After the war, the South lay in ruins while the North continued to enjoy unprecedented prosperity. Railroad lines now spanned the US; it is no coincidence that the ceremonial "Golden Spike" completing the first transcontinental railroad was driven in May 1869, a mere four years after the war had ended. The increased mobility across the country—combined with emancipation, reconstruction, the rapid rise of industry, the continued influx of immigrants, and a postwar spike in migration—resulted in profound changes to American culture and entertainment.

The fragmentation of the entertainment market reflected the country's broader cultural diversity and economic health. Yet it also led to the decline of minstrelsy, which was forced to compete with other, fresher forms of popular entertainment. Established minstrel troupes, too, suddenly had to face competition from within: a rising number of newly freed blacks got their toeholds in entertainment by becoming minstrel performers in the postwar years. As they joined the ranks, black minstrels emphasized their authenticity. Earlier minstrels had merely posed as black, but the new brand of minstrels were, they asserted, the real deal. Their claims worked: white critics wrote enthusiastically about the legitimacy of black minstrel troupes (Toll 1976, 113), and audiences were similarly impressed. By the late nineteenth century, black minstrels were less the exception than the rule.

Blackface minstrelsy permitted black performers a means of entry into the country's entertainment industry in numbers that would have otherwise been unthinkable at the time. Yet the genre forced them to perpetuate—and surely, in many cases, to internalize—highly deprecating portrayals of black American life (Woll 1989, 2). The same went for audiences: the genre grew so popular with black spectators after the Civil War that by the late nineteenth century many theater owners waived their own seating policies, which restricted blacks to the balcony, when minstrel troupes came through town (Toll 1974, 227).

The increase in minstrels, along with the genre's continued popularity, resulted in larger troupes. Early minstrel troupes were typically small: the Virginia Minstrels, after all, featured but four performers. But postwar troupes offered anywhere from fifteen to over 100 players. Troupe managers,

eager to compete with newer entertainment forms, also began offering more visual spectacle in their minstrel shows: larger production numbers, more expensive sets, more lavish costuming (Preston 2008, 21). While these new super-sized productions were popular with audiences, they also put added pressures on minstrelsy's industrymen, who had to spend more on their troupes than ever before.

The new scope of minstrelsy accompanied a shift in content. While popular songs written before and during the Civil War reflected current events with remarkable accuracy and a great deal of emotion, postwar songs reflected the nation's collective desire to look ahead and move beyond the emotional exhaustion, sorrow, and anxiety that clouded the war years. A vast majority of American popular songwriters—newly concentrated in the northern, eastern, and western US—thus showed little interest in depicting the lives of southerners, whether black or white. Most songwriters steered clear not just of the South, but of any negative news of the day, in favor of cheerier, more upbeat, more generalized songs (Hamm 1979, 254).

The stereotypes propagated in prewar blackface minstrelsy continued largely unchallenged in the postwar years. Yet after the war, minstrelsy, like popular song, shifted emphasis away from the South and the plantation. Postwar troupes began to focus instead on urban settings. White minstrels, in particular, began to depict ethnic groups other than blacks, if in similarly broad, stereotypical ways: pigtail-wearing, bucktoothed Asians; whiskey-guzzling, belligerent Irishmen; wurst-gobbling, beer-swilling Germans (Toll 1976, 105). In these cases, the use of blackface was less a means for specific imitation as it was a long-familiar stage convention.

In an attempt to avoid competition with newer entertainment forms that became faddish in big cities, minstrel troupes took advantage of the country's new transportation system by touring. Troupes crossed the country by train, playing in small towns and rural areas. While the various approaches that postwar minstrel troupes took to remain viable helped prolong the genre, the entertainment form expanded, changed, and influenced other forms so much that it lost its uniqueness and faded in popularity by the turn of the century (ibid.).

Union Square and Tin Pan Alley

In booming late-nineteenth-century New York City, the sheet music and theater industries grew rapidly and symbiotically, exerting influence on the

new entertainment genres that supplanted minstrelsy. By this point, the city's population had grown large enough to support a dizzying assortment of theater styles, and many venues could afford to become newly specific with their programming. Variety theaters, burlesque houses, opera houses, dance venues, and circus arenas cropped up across the city in response to ever-growing demand (Mates 1985, 33). While the Bowery had long been home to a number of important entertainment venues, New York City did not have a truly consolidated theater district—nor did the country have a cohesive entertainment industry—until the mid- to late nineteenth century. Yet as New York grew, the ways that theater was made, produced, and consumed changed significantly, both locally and nationally.

The establishment of a district specifically given over to the theater and its industry is due in part to the development of the city's transit system. Mass transit first commenced in New York in the late 1800s, when elevated lines were constructed along Broadway, which remained a major artery. The elevated lines made points along the long and storied avenue easier to access for the city's increasingly far-flung residents. The aptly named Union Square, where Broadway and Fourth Avenue converged at 14th Street, became one such point. Through the 1870s, Union Square became a thriving retail area, as well as the city's first theater district, or "rialto."

What distinguished Union Square's theater district from the independent cluster of venues still crowding the Bowery was both its new, close connection to the rapidly developing commercial theater industry, and its increasingly tight relationships with other, related entertainment businesses. Union Square became not just the home to a cluster of new theaters, but also to businesses that developed alongside, served, and benefited them: variety houses, talent agencies, printing companies, costume shops, Steinway's piano store, Samuel French's play publishing company, Napoleon Sarony's photography studio, hotels, restaurants, and bars (Traub 2005, 8).

The neighborhood also became home to the first Tin Pan Alley-style sheet-music firm in 1875, when T.B. Harms's company moved to an office at Broadway and 12th Street (Jasen 2003, 171–3). Prior to this point, the music industry, like the theater industry, was unconsolidated. Independent music publishers were spread out all over the country, with the highest concentration in cities such as Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Cincinnati. Yet T.B. Harms managed to distinguish itself by publishing such an enviable string of hit songs through the 1880s that other companies began imitating its business practices—and joining it in Union Square.

By the late 1890s, most of the song publishers in the increasingly crowded Union Square relocated uptown, to 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. That block was nicknamed "Tin Pan Alley" shortly thereafter, ostensibly because of the racket the district's many composers and song-pluggers made as they banged away at pianos during business hours in an attempt to compose and sell the newest hit songs to passersby (Hamm 1979, 284–5). The term "Tin Pan Alley" became synonymous with the American sheet-music industry, especially once the many newly consolidated Manhattan-based publishing houses began to corner the market (Stempel 2010, 145).

Uncle Tom's Cabin and *The Black Crook*

During the Civil War era, the rise in popularity of "Tom shows," or dramatized versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, resulted in the country's first blockbuster stage productions (Frick and LoMonaco 1995, 1167). When, a decade later, *The Black Crook* opened in New York to even more extraordinary commercial success, the theater industry's obsession with long-running productions was born.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first appeared serially in the abolitionist paper *The National Era* in 1851, and was published as a novel the following year. Proof that it "had a profound and polarizing impact" on the country in the lead-up to the war is perhaps reflected in the myriad theatrical adaptations of the story, many with music, which began appearing on American stages following the release of the book (Stempel 2010, 36). One of the earliest and most successful productions was by playwright George Aiken. His adaptation, mentioned earlier in this chapter as an example of popular melodrama, ran for an unprecedented 100 nights in Troy, New York in 1852. It premiered in New York City in July 1853 (Lott 1993, 220–1). There, it surpassed even the most optimistic of expectations by running for over 300 performances at a time when long runs were simply unheard of (Stempel 2010, 37). The show's unusual success hardly went unnoticed: competing versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* blanketed the northeast through the remainder of the 1850s (Lott 1993, 222).

Aiken's blockbuster production was so long—30 scenes and eight *tableaux* over six acts—that it required the elimination of an afterpiece, thus influencing the rise of the "one-play entertainment" (Stempel 2010, 39). While a few managers remained certain that the monstrous success of Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a fluke, even the most dogged skeptics were convinced